

"Would it might rain, now!": The Quail Rattle, A Walapai Fetish

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For many Native Americans, Thanksgiving is an odd holiday celebrating Pilgrim survivals and nearly four hundred years of genocide and conquest. So when in 1994, while teaching in Phoenix, I was somewhat at a loss and yet thankful when my Walapai student, Alfonso Havatone, invited me to join his family in Thanksgiving at Kingman, Arizona. Awakening the old uncle after midnight, we found our lodging and settled in until morning when the new day was revived with song. Joseph Havatone, the old uncle, was a celebrated singer among the Walapai and that morning I noticed the two gourd rattles that he used to sanctify our Thanksgiving. Later that day when he appeared at the dinner, he offered me the "Quail Rattle" as a gift of thanks for my contribution to his nephew's education.

The Quail Rattle, a Walapai fetish, came to me that Thanksgiving in the spirit of family and sharing, as a result, I have tried to share it wisely when teaching the organicism inherent in Native American traditions. Despite its striking traditional symbolism, I have often been disappointed by my students' failure to divine its meaning in keeping with the traditional Native religion. With no markings denoting quail, the Quail Rattle seems to defy their imagination. When presented with an accompanying Papago oral text, however, students are more apt to acknowledge the organic power that pervades American Indian religious traditions. Intent upon sharing this pedagogy, it is my purpose with this essay to offer the images, text and analysis of the Quail Rattle as it exhibits an all embracing Native American religious organicism.

The term Pai, among anthropologists, has generally denoted the Walapai, Havasupai, and related Yuman tribes that aboriginally inhabit the canyons, valleys and rims of the Colorado River through Arizona and California, as well as, Baja California.¹ A predominantly arid habitat, Walapai territory features hot summers and mild winters. Cloudbursts, occurring almost daily in July and August, are featured in the Walapai environment. During these violent summer thunderstorms, the unusually dry arroyos carry flood water into the basins that afterwards quickly soaks into the soil and evaporates. Dependent upon this monsoon cycle, desert flora and fauna was relatively abundant and diverse across the tribe's aboriginal homeland.²

In the context of understanding these traditions it is appropriate to consider some of the parameters of a traditional Native American ethos. As Daniel Brinton remarked long ago, the "first maxim" is "to sift and scrutinize authorities, and to reject whatever betrays the plastic hand of the European."³ Unlike modern European languages and cosmologies, Native traditional languages and worldviews were void of abstractions.⁴ Native mythologies, accordingly, are not given to the ideological meta-narratives characteristic of modernism and the Western intellectual tradition. As a result their worldviews are senuously engaged with natural forms as metaphorical referants and value axioms.⁵

From early times, linguistic studies of American Indian languages have noted an "inner form" that is strikingly universal.⁶ Structurally Native languages are incorporative showing an overwhelming preference for concepts of action, verbs, rather than concepts of existence, nouns.⁷ Furthermore, in 1636, Paul Le Jeune, S. J. declared, "Metaphor is largely in use among these Peoples; unless you accustom yourself to it, you will understand nothing."⁸ Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, likewise, declared that the philosophy of the Indian mind is disposed to "pure allegory, under which truths are hide."⁹

Affirming this highly metaphorical character of Native world view, Ruth Underhill has suggested that these traditions constitute a "magic language" fluid with striking natural metaphors.¹⁰ Such narratives, moreover, carry both a metaphoric and a mnemonic value in association with local idiom.¹¹ Largely these metaphorical expressions are concrete and attached to the natural forms and forces or nature persons characteristic of American Indian religious cosmologies.¹² In such accounts, the recurring theme is one of connection to people and nature. These connections are explored through kinship in association with a sense of place. This kinship ethos is much more than a mere structure, it actually frames and shapes the narrative.¹³ In, for example, a study of Western Apache geopiety, where moral values encoded in narratives are ascribed to place and these stories "stalk" the listeners with an essential normative wisdom.¹⁴

Native worldview is, furthermore, filled with signifiers that strike an accord with the natural environment as a means to insure power. Two epistemological sources are manifest in making this point. First, there is the recognized metaphorical character of myth¹⁵ that reflects a Native metaphysic of nature wherein the natural forms and forces are expressive of the Ultimate Power, or essence, of the Great Spirit.¹⁶ Second, there is a mystical dimension born of dream in association with nature.¹⁷ As mystical knowledge, moreover, myth is the literature of the soul and it occupies the same zone as dream.¹⁸ Originating in dream and vision, myths are thusly metaphorical of the spiritual potentiality in the human body, a potentiality that originates in Nature. As such, we observe that the same powers that animate human life also animate the life of the natural world about us.¹⁹

Much of Native traditions are, thus, about putting yourself in accord with the natural world where the goal is harmony with nature and ethical reciprocity.²⁰ Underhill referred to this practice as "sympathetic magic"²¹ whereby the natural referant in its organic properties exhibits the desired power when presented in an empathetic manner via song, dance and ritual. Power is organically revealed from natural process via sympathetic ritual association. This is a theme that I associate with simile and experience so that through the use of an organic referant, such as a ritual fetish, its spiritual and ecological properties are affected sympathetically and they evoke power, which is itself organic and germane to the natural processes and forms surrounding us in our experience. Combining this idea of simile and nature based experience, I refer to this concept as "simile of association" and offer it as a tool for deriving the metaphysical values ensconsed in traditional mythology. In such traditional oral narratives, the "simile of association" is an experience evidencing the ritual sympathetic magic and reveal metaphorically the organic referant. The process is an organicism where value rests in the natural form, force or element as referant. As a result, the Nature, aka Nature Persons are taken seriously and respected for their ecological evocations and organic associations.²²

Acknowledging this Native organicism, a further consideration of a traditional American Indian world view is an emphasis upon the sensuous rather than the emotional.²³ As a result, modern emotional motivations are ill suited metaphors of interpretation when considering Native narratives. Turning now to the rattle, we are prepared to begin our review, explication and analysis.



Made of a bottle gourd with a cottonwood handle, the Quail Rattle is symbolically painted with black splotches about the top third of its volume. Below these, there are aquamarine splotches with an inlay of stylized red marks resembling a block letter E on its inverted face. Featured at the bottom of the gourd, there are light green aguave like images suggesting the desert flora.

Sharing their desert habitat with the linguistically related Yumans, the Walapai were also regional associates with the Pima and Papago, as well as, others of the Uto-Aztecan language family. In this context narrative and cultural diffusion is an expected adaption and practice. While outside the reported Walapai folklore, the following Coyote text, recorded among the Papago, nevertheless, has an appropriate place among the Southwestern Indian narrative tradition.

Quail children under the bushes
were chattering.
Our comrade Coyote heard them.
Softly he came padding up
And stood wriggling his ears
In all directions.
Our comrade Coyote, thirsty,
Just yonder lay down to sleep.
Quail birds above him
Fluttered their wings.
Frightened, he jumped up and looked about him.
Haiya, God my father!
Would it might rain, now!²⁴

In sympathetic magic, rain is the referent of the Quail Rattle. At the top, the dark *cumulo nimbus* thunderclouds are represented in the black splotches, while the inverted E signs are symbolic of thunder-lightning bolts amid an aqua-marine downpour. At the base, the desert vegetation is alive with the spring green images that mean life for all things inhabiting the desert. As such, the Quail Rattle is a fetish conveying, in simile of association, the atmospheric-ecological process that is the revivifying life of the Walapai homeland. When accompanied with song, there is ceremonial revivification among the Walapai and their environment conveying a ritual sympathetic magic that accords an egalitarian respect for creation. In the Papago narrative, a wily coyote, trickster-creator, overhears his quail prey chattering in the brush and he ritually acknowledges the four cardinal directions while shamanically wriggling his ears. Here predator and prey are linked in the irony of creation and in its ever manifesting cosmic drama that is life and death. Thirsty from his endeavors with the quail, Coyote is startled when the metaphorical Quail above clap the air in peels of thunder, which generate the lightning renewals and life-giving rains.

Characteristic of the aboriginal language use of metaphor, Thunder, here in simile of association with the flutter of quail rising at one's feet, is the organic referent that insures life in the desert. Living in urban sprawl and faced with a dearth of organic experience, my students often have no idea of the simile of association that holds between the quail and thunder. In my childhood in Virginia, I explain, it was common to walk through old fields and experience the shock of a covey of quail taking flight from near one's feet. As they fluttered their wings making a sound like thunder, the experience always seemed to set my heart into my throat. By way of experiential comparison, years later while building fire trails during the spring in the Pacific Northwest, we were often caught far from the protecting shelter of our vehicles when a thunderstorm erupted upon us. In such moments, there was nowhere to hide or place for the crew to take refuge as the storm was terrifyingly about us and like the experiences with the quail, my heart always seemed to leap into my throat while this cosmic creator, Thunder, passed.

Understanding these organic relationships is the key to acknowledging the mysteries of American Indian religious traditions. As scholars and teachers, when our students come to our classes, we must note that they are filled with the platitudes of abstraction characteristic of Western symbology and philosophy. It is, therefore, essential that we acknowledge the experiential organicism that belies the Native sense of cosmic creation. For me this is the meaning that old Joe Havatone shared with me that Thanksgiving day in 1994. It is a perennial wisdom of the ancestors, this lesson of the Quail Rattle, which keeps us in touch with the intrinsic value of the natural world. Long may it be so.

¹Thomas R. McGuire, "Walapai," in *Handbook of North American Indians*, William C. Sturtevant, general editor, v. 10 Southwest, Alfonso Ortiz, volume editor. Smithsonian Institution. Washington, D.C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1983: 25. Steven A. Weber and P. David Seaman, editors. *Havasupai Habitat: A. F. Whiting's Ethnography of a Traditional Indian Culture*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1985: 16-20; and Henry F. Dobyns and Robert C. Euler, *The Havasupai People*. Phoenix: Indian Tribal series, 1971: 2-3.

²McGuire, "Walapai," 25.

³Daniel Brinton, *Myths of the Americas: Symbolism and Mythology of Indians of the Americas* [1868]. Blauvelt, NY: Multimedia, 1976:3.

⁴Brinton, *Essays of an Americanist*, 326 writes: "The deficiency in abstract terms is generally true of these [Native] languages. They did not have them, because they had no use for them -- and the more blessed was their condition."

⁵In this point, one may benefit from David Abrams, *The Spell of the Sensuous*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996.

⁶Daniel G. Brinton, *The American Race: A Linguistic Classification and Ethnographic Description of the Native Tribes of North and South America*. Philadelphia: David McKay, publishers, 1901: 56 citing Wilhelm van Humbolt.

⁷Brinton, *American Race*, 56. See also Ruth Murray Underhill, *Singing for Power: The Song Magic of the Papago Indians of Southern Arizona* [19130]. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 17.

⁸*Jesuit Relations*.

⁹Henry R. Schoolcraft, *Notes on the Iroquois: or Contributions to the Statistics, Aboriginal History, Antiquity and General Ethnology of Western New York* [1846]. Millwood, NY: Kraus Reprint, 1975: 37.

¹⁰Underhill, *Singing for Power*, 16; see also Brinton, *Essays of An Americanist*, 299-300.

¹¹Julie Cruikshank, *Life Lived Like A Story*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990: 2.

¹²Brinton, *Aboriginal American Authors*, 10.

¹³See for example Gladys Reichard, *Dezba: Woman of the Desert*. New York: J. J. Augustin, 1939; Alice Marriott, *Maria: The Potter of San Ildefonso*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1948; Nancy Oestrich Lurie, *Mountain Wolf Woman, Sister of Crashing Thunder: Autobiography of a Winnebago Woman*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961; Lalla Scott, *Karnee: A Paiute Narrative, the Story of Annie Lowry*. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1966; and accounts recorded by Truman Michelson, "The Autobiography of a Fox Indian Woman" in the *Fortieth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, 1918-19*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, U. S. Government Printing Office, 1925: 291-349; "The Narrative of a Southern Cheyenne Woman" in the *Smithsonian Misc. Collections*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1932, v87: 5; "Narratives of an Apache Woman," *American Anthropologist* 35: 595-610; Ruth M. Underhill, *The Autobiography of a Papago Woman*. Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association, No. 46. Menasha, WI: American Anthropological Association, 1936; Jane Holden Kelly, *Yaqui Women: Contemporary Life Histories*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978; as cited in Cruckshank, *Like A Story*, 3, 358.

¹⁴Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Place: landscape and language among the western Apache*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996.

¹⁵Brinton, *Essays of An Americanist*, 291-292; Joseph Campbell, *Transformations of Myth Through Time*. New York: Harper & Row, 1990: 96; and Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, Betty Sue Flowers, editor. New York: Doubleday, 1988: 31, 131.

¹⁶Joseph Epes Brown, *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian*. New York: Crossroads Press, 1992: 37, 60, 70.

¹⁷Campbell, *Power of Myth*, 126.

¹⁸Campbell, *Transformations of Myth*, 94.

¹⁹Campbell, *Power of Myth*, 22.

²⁰Christopher Vecsey, "Environmental Religions" in *American Indian Environments: Ecological Issues in Native American History*, edited by Christopher Vecsey and Robert W. Venables. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1980: 1-37. See also Åke Hultkrantz, *Belief and Worship in Native America*, edited by Christopher Vecsey. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1981: 117-135; and Campbell, *Power of Myth*, 23-24.

²¹Ruth M. Underhill, *Red Man's Religion: Belief and Practices of the Indians North of Mexico*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965: 24, 181; and Underhill, *Singing for Power*, 6, 12, 22.

²²See A. Irving Hallowell, "Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View" in *Contributions to Anthropology* [1960]. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976: 364-365, as a means for explaining this ontology of Nature Persons exemplifying this Native organicism.

²³Brinton, *Essays of An Americanist*, 293-294 and in general Abrams, *Spell of the Sensuous*.

²⁴Underhill, *Singing for Power*, 51.